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WMD Redux

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But I'd shut my eyes in the sentry box, So I didn't see nothin' wrong.

--Rudyard Kipling

The report published yesterday by the WMD Commission will delight all policy wonks who have a collector's passion for intelligence failures. Equipped with a rearward-looking telescope called hindsight, hunting down other people's mistakes is a fun sport -- enjoyed by policy wonks as well as the media. But prudence suggests we should also have a forward-looking telescope to warn us of policy failures on the road ahead.

Congress, unfortunately, has a knack for noisily debating past intelligence failures, the better to distract the public from its chronic policy failures. Recall what happened to the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission late last year. Those who itch to blame every enemy attack on an intelligence failure banged their drums, clamoring for an "absolutely essential" reorganization of the entire intelligence bureaucracy, and insisting this multilayered cake had to be topped off with an intelligence czar.

Their clamor drowned out all the other measures that the 9/11 Report called for. Congress thus got away without living up to the recommendations that it consolidate its multiple and redundant committees, legislate reliable ID cards and biometric passports, redirect airport screening toward explosives rather than nail-clippers, and reform the broken system for visitors' visas.

The WMD Commission was given a far more restrictive charter than the 9/11 Commission. It was told to focus exclusively on the intelligence community. Fortunately, the commissioners had the wisdom to look beyond an indictment of past failures. To their great credit, they offer not merely a good read for Monday morning quarterbacks, but also a profound analysis of the unique problems that afflict U.S. intelligence on weapons of mass destruction.

These problems will not go away. The worldwide proliferation of WMD capabilities can be slowed down, but it cannot be stopped. It is high time that our body politic took this unpleasant fact on board. The globalization of science and technology will gradually, but ineluctably, spread the wherewithal for building mass destruction weapons. We are thus fated to confront a threat of a kind we have never faced before. And intertwined with this dismal fate is another predicament: Whatever the intelligence community can contribute regarding the WMD threat is severely limited by the unique aspects of mass-destruction weapons.

I shall try to explain this predicament for the busy readers who cannot peruse the 500 page report. To start my tutorial, I need to distinguish between tactical and strategic intelligence. (The Commission's reference to "current intelligence" and "strategic" or long-term analysis addresses a different issue.) An example of tactical intelligence that would have greatly reduced the horror of 9/11 is a hypothetical FBI alert sent out Sept. 10, 2001, informing the Boston airport authorities that several foreign hijackers, armed only with knives and Mace, will try to board United Flight 175 and American Flight 11 the next morning. It is bliss to have such tactical intelligence and worth great effort to obtain it. It is utterly irresponsible to count on it.

Strategic intelligence prior to 9/11, by contrast, could have been gleaned from open sources, and if acted upon, might well have prevented 9/11. We knew all along how Israel's airline protected cockpits from hijackers. And in 1994 we were shown a "smoking gun": Algerian terrorists, who had hijacked a French passenger plane, landed in Marseille and demanded (unsuccessfully) to have it

refueled, evidently to enhance the inferno they wanted to cause by crashing the plane into a Paris landmark. For the U.S. government to ignore this highly visible strategic warning was a policy failure, not an intelligence failure.

With this strategic/tactical distinction in mind, we can now see why the intelligence task regarding WMD is the most difficult of all intelligence missions. To obtain valuable tactical intelligence of a major aggression with conventional arms is much easier, because the enemy's preparations are more visible. For instance, in July 1990, a few days before Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, both the Pentagon's intelligence and the CIA had compelling evidence of Iraqi preparations for an attack across Kuwait's borders.

But an enemy planning a clandestine, terrorist attack with mass destruction weapons would not have to deploy large forces that we could detect. To cause mass casualties far exceeding those of 9/11, he could send just one competent and trustworthy courier -- someone not on America's long list of suspects -- with a few vials of an easily dispersible biological agent that would propagate into a pandemic. Or if the enemy's choice of WMD were nuclear, two smuggled bombs could inflict on American society an unimaginable social, political and economic disaster. Should we be so fortunate as to receive tactical intelligence of either of these kinds of attack, it would either be due to immense enemy stupidity or to an improbable stroke of luck.

We must not let the illusory quest for "reliable and timely" tactical warning blind us to strategic intelligence in plain sight. Keep in mind, taking advantage of strategic intelligence is standard procedure for the development of vaccines to protect us from natural viruses as well as from biological weapons. U.S. health authorities do not delay the production of vaccines until they receive a frantic report from Los Angeles airport that passengers with a lethal bird flu have landed, or from New York that smallpox has been spread in a crowded metro station.

Strangely, however, to protect America against a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon, our government has been unresponsive to strategic intelligence. Such intelligence is all around us. We know that terrorist groups have tried to acquire nuclear weapons, we know that North Korea has them, we realize the safety of Pakistan's sizeable nuclear arsenal may hang by the thread of President Musharraf's survival. Yet, the policy makers keep neglecting the need for better instruments to detect and disable a smuggled nuclear bomb. Defense scientists have offered promising recommendations to this end since 1997. Nothing was done for seven years. The bureaucratic molasses began to heave only recently, with throngs of officials holding dozens of meetings. Of course, what would help prevent nuclear terrorism are not meetings in Washington but a vigorous, generously supported research program by scientists working in their laboratories. The WMD Commission agrees. Alas, at the speed with which this endeavor is proceeding, we will be lucky to have a useful capability deployed in 2020.

At the end of the day, the best tactical and strategic intelligence is worthless unless the policy makers find a way to make use of it. And both types of intelligence usually leave the user with multiple uncertainties. How likely is the predicted event? How closely will its key aspects resemble the picture drawn by the intelligence community? Would it be prudent to ignore the ambiguous warning, instead of launching a pre-emptive military strike against the presumed terrorists or the rogue nation harboring them? On which side of this knife will the president be blamed for reaching a very costly and dangerous decision?

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To realize the gravity of these questions for the coming decades, it helps to consider another disturbing piece of strategic intelligence that is now in plain sight: the possibility of a widespread and prolonged electrical blackout caused by a single, relatively low-yield nuclear weapon. To shed more light on this threat, Congress established a commission which was staffed by highly competent scientists. The report by these experts was published last summer. It explained how the electromagnetic pulse from a high-altitude explosion of a nuclear weapon can deprive a large

region of electricity and permanently disable electric equipment, thus shutting down the Internet, traffic lights, gasoline stations, food storage, police cars, fire engines, and municipal water and sewer systems. Without protective measures, such a vast and disabling blackout could last for months and cause near anarchy with huge casualties.

The media barely noticed this story. But scientific papers published in Russia and China indicate that the physics of such a blackout are no secret. Could North Korean scientists and engineers learn how to carry out such an attack? One can hope that their capability would not (or will never) be up to this rather complex task. Perhaps so.

In any event, whether under the influence of hope or fear, the buck stops not with the intelligence community but with the policy makers. It is the president and Congress who must decide to take costly and dangerous actions, or accept the risks of inaction. It is these elected policy makers who must rally the people to give first priority to the survival of our country. Most Americans prefer to believe that the United States will have a bright future and think prophets of doom belong to decaying nations. This healthy frame of mind puts a ceiling on our tolerance for intelligence warnings about all sorts of cataclysmic terrorist attacks. Fair enough. As long as we don't shut our eyes in the sentry box.

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